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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C-1WASHINGTON POST
12 DECEMBER 1982

A Lurid Little Washington Power Game

A bitter fight among 'friends' lays bare a handcuffed administration

By Robert G. Kaiser

FOR SHEER THEATRICALITY, the Dreary Saga of Rick Burt would be hard to top. It is a saga disguised as a typical Washington battle over Senate confirmation of a controversial nominee for high federal office, but it goes well beyond the typical. This is Washington drama on a lavish scale — a tale that would suit that definitive Washington novel that seems never to get written.

On second thought perhaps a novelist would find this tale wanting. Though rich in ambition, intrigue, high policy disputes and political cunning, this story is short on sym-

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pathetic characters. An outsider would easily be forgiven for failing to find a hero here.

But even without a hero, this saga reveals a good deal about Washington these days — about how nasty are the battles among our Republican rulers, about how these supposed friends are apparently paralyzed by profound differences over what to do about nuclear weapons.

On the level of symbolic politics, the fight over Richard Burt, an ambitious young official in the State Department, is a manifestation of that deep division. Burt is opposed, generally speaking, by Republicans who really believed the 1980 GOP platform, which called for American nuclear superiority and an "end the Carter coverup of Soviet violations of SALT I and SALT II." Many of

Burt's opponents are using the fight against him to try to advance that point of view.

The principal players in this saga include the following:

- Richard R. Burt, a driven 35-year-old who made a name for himself as the aggressive, hard-line national security correspondent of The New York Times during the Carter administration. Burt jumped from journalism to a job in Alexander M. Haig's State Department as director of the office of political-military affairs. Burt is a man who stirs the emotions of others. Even his friends — who stick up for him — call him arrogant; however, his friends seem heavily outnumbered by people who don't warm to him.

- Secretary of State George Shultz, who decided to put Burt in the new job Alexander M. Haig had picked for him, assistant secretary of state for European affairs. Shultz did this without knowing Burt personally, apparently in response to a plea from Haig. Willy-nilly, Shultz became Burt's patron and protector. How he likes this role is not known.

- Michael Pillsbury, the "national security adviser" to the Senate Steering Committee, an organization of conservative and ultraconservative senators. Pillsbury is a smart, shrewd and — according to his enemies, also a considerable group — bare-knuckled operator who blames Burt for having a hand in his unseemly ouster from the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in April 1981. He had been the agency's temporary acting director. Pillsbury was one of a number of hardliners who had served on Reagan transition teams in the various national security agencies, but were never offered permanent jobs. He is now a key agitator in the block-Burt movement.

- David S. Sullivan, who like Pillsbury was fired out of ACDA early in 1981 (he had been its acting counselor) and now works for Sen. Steven D. Symms (R-Idaho). Sullivan was an analyst of Soviet strategic capabilities for the CIA, a job he lost in 1978 after leaking a secret report to Richard Perle, then assistant to Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.) and now an assistant secretary of defense. Sullivan is also active in the block-Burt effort.

- Sens. Jesse Helms (N.C.), Orrin G. Hatch (Utah), Malcolm Wallop (Wyo.), Barry Goldwater (Ariz.), Symms and other Republicans who have lined up against Burt.

- A retinue of White House and State Department officials who are debating what to do about Burt and another controversial nominee, Robert T. Grey Jr., whom many of the same senators want to block as deputy director of ACDA. (Grey is a foreign service officer and protégé of Eugene V. Rostow, the Democrat Reagan picked to run ACDA. But that's another saga.)

Newspapers don't have room to print sagas, so this version is necessarily abbreviated. The plot line is relatively simple; it is the machinations that get complicated.

When Burt got his first job under Haig, as director of political-military affairs, Senate confirmation was not required. But his promotion to assistant secretary gave him many rivals and enemies on Capitol Hill a

With Pillsbury apparently playing quarterback, the opponents mustered several lines of argument against Burt's confirmation. One was on policy: Burt, his critics said, was too soft on arms control and related issues. He was a captive of the foreign service bureaucracy and not a true Reaganaut. Pillsbury's differences with Burt went back to 1981 when both were still in the administration and Burt helped scuttle the Pillsbury-Sullivan proposal that the United States should accuse Moscow of violating the SALT treaties.

A second line of attack was that Burt compromised important secrets as a reporter. Helms, Goldwater and others hit this point the hardest. They point to a story by Burt in The Times of June 29, 1979, revealing the existence of a U.S. satellite code-named Chalet that could be reprogrammed from earth to pick up signals from Soviet rockets during test flights. This was a grave security breach, Burt's critics said.

(The merits of this charge are not easily weighed by laymen. Whatever its merits, it has amused senators and others who were promoters of the never-ratified SALT II treaty, who considered Burt a formidable adversary in his New York Times days. During 1978-80, Burt's stories — including many leaked to him by allies of the right-wingers now attacking him — often gave fits to SALT supporters.)

Another line of attack, remarkable for its sleaziness, involves Burt's private life. Some critics note Burt's personal relationship with a woman reporter for The New York Times, hinting that he leaked sensitive information to her. Sen. Hatch made this charge openly in a letter to Burt a week ago Friday. "It would help [your chances for confirmation]," Hatch wrote to Burt, "if you could lay to rest the rumors about Judith Miller's articles on arms control appearing so soon after your own meetings with her, but these are less important to my colleagues and me than the sub-

stantive issues." How's that for an elegant formulation?

Burt's attempts to refute his critics have not gone well. On the matter of publishing classified secrets, he has actually written a letter to Hatch listing four occasions when, as a reporter, he persuaded The Times to suppress sensitive information. "I took steps to insure that considerations of national security were taken into account" by The Times, Burt